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The suburbs and Chicago need to stop fighting each other and band together or northeastern Illinois will lose out to such states as Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania in snagging a share of federal transportation dollars. So U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, warned a group of north suburban business leaders Monday morning at a forum held at the Hyatt in Deerfield.

The matter is particularly urgent as the Senate and House of Representatives move forward on a bill, called TEA-21, for transportation funding that comes up only once every six years. The surface transportation bill's deadline is April 30.

Kirk and others who spoke Monday said they were determined to see Illinois get more of the federal transportation dollars in TEA-21 than it did six years ago.

"Why did Illinois lose TEA-21? Illinois lost because there was fighting between the suburbs and the city," Kirk said. "The enemy is not the city and not the suburbs, but it is other big cities," he said.

TEA-21, in place from 1998 to 2003, came out of the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act of 1991, which stressed the need to provide multiyear federal funding for transportation projects and allowed local and state governments to be more flexible in their use of the funds.

So far, the Senate version of the bill has pledged \$318 billion for transportation while the House version has pledged \$275 billion.

Greater needs

But leaders from northeastern Illinois need to argue that the region needs more than a strict proportional share of the dollars because of its unique position as a national transportation hub, Metropolitan Planning Council President MarySue Barrett told business leaders Monday.

Barrett said she would like to see each state's allocation determined based on needs and not on population.

"This region lost \$600 million over six years because the (previous) formula hurt us," Barrett said.

"We made progress, but that was catch-up. Between 1994 and 1999, we had no state package (of transportation funding)," Barrett said.

Also of concern, the Illinois First program, which has pumped millions of dollars into rebuilding state highways, is set to expire in June, Barrett said.

Planning forum

The seminar was sponsored by Business Leaders for Transportation -- made up of the Metropolitan Planning Council, Chicago Metropolis 2020 and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce -- and was one in a series of forums bringing together business leaders and their congressional representatives.

Dick Smith of IDOT also said he was a sore loser six years ago when Illinois lost out on more federal transportation funding.

"I hated to lose. I've been working to fix things," he said.

"With \$275 billion in the House bill, it will be impossible for Illinois to add new projects. The funding over the last six years has not been keeping pace with inflation," Smith said.

Even the \$318 billion Senate bill would only allow for a "modest" increase in projects, he said.

But Smith said the state has hope in a "two-year re-opener" provision in the bill, which would allow legislators to come back in one and one-half years for more funding if new revenue could be found.

"Then we can step forward with some new initiatives," Smith said.

Top lobbyists

Illinois is also in luck because two very powerful congressmen live in the state: Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-14th of Yorkville, and U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, D-3rd, of Chicago, Kirk said.

"They like each other a great deal," he said.

The fact that Illinois is getting 28 percent more in funding than the bill from six years ago shows the power of the Hastert-Lipinski bond, Kirk said.

"It is about political muscle. Illinois is the one with political muscle," Kirk said.

In particular, four new massive transit starts have come to Illinois as a result of Hastert and Lipinski, including the \$1.2 billion STAR line for the northwest suburbs and the widening of the Route 60 bridge, Kirk said.

The Route 60 bridge project will be funded with \$4 million from the Illinois Department of Transportation, \$4 million from the Illinois Toll Authority and \$8 million from the federal government, Kirk said. Regarding the federal component, Kirk promised: "I will come through."